
Blessed are ...
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and Matthew 5:1-12

[image: beatitudes]

How many times have you heard that reading from Matthew? The familiar “Blessed are those who ...” The reading which is the opening act in what we call “the sermon on the mount”. The reading - which we call the “beatitudes”. The word “beatitudes” coming from the latin “beatitudo” which means, blessedness. And now - the tough question - do you really expect to hear anything new today about this well-known and well-loved text?

To try to get some perspective on this, I want to quote from Nancy Hastings Sehested. She says, “We have read the Bible for so long and with so little at stake that we often read it as if it were tame and reasonable. We have read Jesus' words for so long and with so much familiarity that we often think that Jesus' messages are a nice contribution to improving social relationships. The beatitudes offer us in poetic verse the untamed and unreasonable teachings of Jesus.”

She may be right. And yet - I can think of many times in my own life when I've read this text with something at stake. How often in your own life have you been poor in spirit? How often have you mourned? How often have you been hungry or thirsty? How often have you been merciful? How often have you been a peacemaker? How often have you felt persecuted? I think we sometimes have a lot at stake when we read this text actually.

[image: I'm fine]

On the other hand - how often have we worked hard to avoid being in those same situations? How often in our own lives have we used denial to avoid showing just how poor in spirit we were? How often have we pretended we had nothing to mourn while our hearts were breaking? How often have we said we were satisfied when we were in fact empty? How often - when someone asked us how we are doing - did we say “I'm fine”

when we were nothing like fine. How often have we chosen the path of retaliation rather than mercy? How often have we chosen to get our own way rather than to bring peace to a situation?

[image: two paths]

If the beatitudes are a list of prerequisites for feeling blessed, I'm not so sure that I'm interested in being blessed. The price of admission seems very high. It almost seems as if we have to choose between two paths. One path allows us to feel secure and in control. The other path is we throw our security to the wind and make ourselves vulnerable to both the pains of the world and the blessings of God. Perhaps we can only really feel the blessings of God when we engage with the pains of the world. What do you think? While you were hearing the beatitudes read just a moment ago, did you feel comforted? Or did you feel like you have been missing out on something? Perhaps the desire to feel blessed isn't so simple after all.

[image: sheep]

And what do you think of St. Paul's preaching to his congregation in 1 Corinthians? Is it my imagination, or is Paul saying that his congregation is not too bright? He says, "consider your own call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth." Or in today's language: none of you are smart, none of you are rich or powerful, and none of you are famous. Is this really a motivational speech? Is Paul actually trying to insult his congregation?

Well, we can read it that way. However, I believe there is a more helpful way to read the text. I believe that Paul is making a contrast, and saying that being smart, rich, or famous are not relevant to faith. What is important - in Paul's words, is "to proclaim Christ crucified". The journey of faith is after all a journey of faith - not a journey of power, or control, or prestige. Moreover, power, control and prestige can prevent us from being open to being blessed.

I'm sure you know what I mean. When we feel clever - like when we think our own ideas are the best - we are not always open to looking for new opportunities. Or for new blessings. When we feel powerful - or rich - perhaps we feel our worlds revolve

around us. And if we feel like that, then we cannot feel blessings, because we believe that we have earned what we have. And that leaves no room for feeling blessed. And when we feel prestige ... when we externalize our own happiness, that never leads to feeling blessed - or happy.

[image: change machine]

Let me share a story with you. This particular story is from a hospital but I'm sure we can all imagine this type of situation happening in other places. Because this happens all the time. Anyway, in this particular story, a doctor in a hospital was on a break. And while in the lobby, she noticed a patient using a machine that changed dollar bills into quarters. And this patient kept changing money again and again. He changed at least \$20 from bills into quarters. And every time the quarters hit the tray at the bottom of the machine, the patient yelled "Jackpot!" with a lot of energy and a huge smile. And every time that the patient yelled "Jackpot!", the doctor was thinking to herself ... "crackpot!". The doctor gave no credence to the patient, and assumed that he was mentally "weak". But the patient was extremely happy. And every time he received his quarters, it was as if a real blessing had been bestowed on him. He felt blessed. But the doctor - and likely other people in the lobby - thought the man was just nuts. I mean, why would anyone get so excited just by converting dollars into quarters. It's true that change machines do resemble slot machines ... a bit. And if you won at a slot machine, you might yell, "Jackpot". But what is there to get excited about when you are basically just paying bills for quarters. But the story isn't over yet.

When the doctor left the building that evening, she noticed that the change machine was being repaired. And when she asked, she was told that the machine was broken. For every dollar put in, the machine had been giving out \$2 worth of quarters.

The blessing of the broken machine was completely missed by the doctor. Because she was too intelligent, too used to being in control, and too used to being "right". The doctor missed out because she "knew better". And I'm not picking on doctors here. We all have stories in our own lives where we were more interested in being right than in being blessed. But the blessing of the broken machine was fully appreciated by the patient who was vulnerable, scared, attentive, and willing to be open to unexpected

blessings.

To me, this story speaks to how we cannot feel blessings ourselves unless we make ourselves vulnerable. It also speaks to the fact that blessings do not come in nice little bags marked “blessing”. In fact, I think that blessings never look like what we would be looking for if we were looking for blessings!

[image: blessings never look like what we would be looking for if we were looking for blessings]

I want to say that again. Blessings never look like what we would be looking for if we were looking for blessings! I believe this is mainly because we usually have no idea what we need in life. That’s why it requires vulnerability to find blessings.

I want to give a somewhat extreme example of blessings not looking like what we would be looking for if we were looking for a blessing. This is the poem “Lord, why did you tell me to love”, by Michel Quoist, a Roman Catholic priest. This was published in 1954. I just could not bring myself to read the text in the original form, so I have adapted it to remove exclusive language.

“Lord, Why Did You Tell Me To Love” by Michel Quoist

(modified only for inclusive language)

Lord, why did you tell me to love everybody? I have tried, but I come back to you frightened ... Lord, I was so peaceful at home, I was so comfortably settled. It was well furnished, and I felt cozy. I was alone. I was at peace, Sheltered from the wind, the rain, the mud. I would have stayed unsullied in my ivory tower. But, Lord you have discovered a breach in my defences. You have forced me to open my door, Like a squall of rain in the face, the cry of strangers has awakened me; like a gale of wind a friendship has shaken me, As a ray of light slips in unnoticed, your grace has stirred me ... and rashly enough, I left my door ajar.

Now Lord, I am lost! Outside strangers were lying in wait for me. I did not know they were so near; in this house, in this street, in this office; my neighbour, my colleague, my friend. As soon as I started to open the door I saw them, with outstretched hands, burning eyes, longing hearts, like beggars on church steps. The first ones came in, Lord.

There was, after all, some space in my heart. I welcomed them. I would have cared for them and fondled them, my very own little lambs, my little flock. You would have been pleased, Lord; I would have served and honoured you in a proper, respectable way.

Until then, it was sensible ... But the next ones, Lord, the other strangers, I had not seen them; they were hidden behind the first ones. There were more of them, they were wretched; they overpowered me without warning. We had to crowd in, I had to find room for them.

Now they have come from all over, in successive waves, pushing one another, jostling one another. They have come from all over town, from all parts of the country, of the world; numberless, inexhaustible. They don't come alone any longer but in groups, bound one to another. They come bending under heavy loads; loads of injustice, of resentment and hate, of suffering and sin ... They drag the world behind them, with everything rusted, twisted, or badly adjusted. Lord, they hurt me! They are in the way, they are everywhere. They are too hungry, they are consuming me! I can't do anything any more; as they come in, they push the door, and the door opens wider ... Lord! My door is wide open!

I can't stand it anymore! It's too much! This is no kind of life! What about my job? my family? my peace? my liberty? and me? Lord, I have lost everything, I don't belong to myself any longer. There's no more room for me at home.

Don't worry, God says, you have gained all. While strangers came in to you, I, your Lord, I, your God, Slipped in among them.

I would love to hear people's reaction to that poem over coffee time after service, or during the week. I have two reactions myself. Firstly, I do agree that without vulnerability we will not find blessings. I agree that it is hard to find God if we stay all snug and tucked up in our own controlled worlds. But I also find the example a bit too extreme. This poem was published in the 1950's, and likely written earlier. So it is no surprise that it doesn't exactly speak to our social situation today. But I struggle with the idea that I have to let my life not be in my control. Like, at all. Surely, we have the right - and the responsibility - to take care of ourselves too. If you think that sounds selfish, you can call it "self-care". Self care is not selfish. Self-care simply recognizes that everyone

need appropriate care - including ourselves. Self-care also recognizes that each of us carry some responsibility for our own care.

[image: Love God. Love your neighbour. Love yourself.]

We need to find a balance between caring for others and our own self-care. The poem gave an extreme example of giving too much of ourselves away. But it's also extreme that while some of us are now getting our 4th shots, 94% of people living in low-income countries are still completely unvaccinated. We have to find a balance. We have to balance our own needs and the needs of the world in a way that works for everyone. And we can learn to do that together. We are not alone. We have each other. Because I believe that that balance between caring for others and self-care is found in community together. As we are with each other.

From the news, it appears as if our pandemic restrictions will be easing over time soon. Soon - I hope - we will be invited back into community in the sense that we can gather freely again.

And as we come back together, perhaps some things will feel like we are going "back to normal". But after 2 years I have no doubt that there will be many new normals forming too. We have changed over the past two years. We have changed as individual people. And we have changed as a congregation. Moreover, even if we have not changed, the community around has definitely changed. It's time to reimagine what it means to "be church" in Brantford.

[image: growth in a crack]

Are we a blessing to Brantford? Are we a blessing to each other? Is that who we want to be? To quote from Nancy Hastings Sehested again: "When we start looking for signs of folks being the church, the beatitudes give us some clues for where to begin the search. Forget looking at our church programs, our good deeds, [our mission statement,] our goals, our numbers and how we are managing it all. The beatitudes tell us to look between the cracks. Look in the places where life is falling apart. Maybe there, or perhaps only there, will we get a glimpse of the reign of God breaking in." Maybe there - in the fractures of our own lives - or perhaps only there, we will find blessings and new life.

Amen.